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Changing Narratives of Sexuality – Concept Paper

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This concept paper focuses on the politics of sexuality. Its focus is on the normative construction of heterosexuality in mainstream narratives of sexuality produced by institutions such as the media, the law, religion and the development industry; by cultural arenas such as popular music and soap operas, as well as for counter narratives produced by women themselves. Foregrounding concepts of heterosexuality, sexuality and gender, the paper explores the connections between them and connections to norms that reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and male supremacy, and the implications for the workings of power and privilege. Narratives of sexuality serve both to affirm and also to challenge these norms. This paper suggests that the analysis of stories affords an opening up of the question of what social role stories can be said to play: stories may perform conservative functions by maintaining dominant orders or alternatively, might be used to transform lives and cultures. It explores how a narrative approach to the study of sexuality can allow us to explore cultural patterns of representations and action in different dimensions of the social, and the contribution of this to women's empowerment.



1. Introduction

‘What do these different narratives of women’s sexuality, by and about women, tell us about tensions and contradictions in the constructions of women’s bodies and sexualities?’

In Nigeria, a young and up-coming actress is photographed nude in ‘respectable’ newspapers, an event that a decade earlier would have been unthinkable. Newspaper versions of this sex scandal remain at odds with the actress’s own narrative, as it unfolds in successive editions of the story. In divorce cases in Egypt’s new family courts, the story of the denial of women’s legal rights to sexual pleasure is not told even as courts construct a different narrative which undermines women’s pursuit of divorce, on the basis of their emotionality and lack of rationality. In Palestine, young women recount stories about their hopes and aspirations for the future in a context where their bodies have become the site of the immobilities and insecurities of the body politic. The narratives of bodily vulnerability and restriction that the young women tell, as well as those told about them, are juxtaposed against the stories in which they resolve to transcend restrictive boundaries and expectations. What do these different narratives of women’s sexuality, by and about women, tell us about tensions and contradictions in the constructions of women’s bodies and sexualities? And what scope is there for women to change restrictive conceptions of sexuality?

The tensions alluded to above arise out of multiple and simultaneous changes being played out on global, regional, national and more local levels, establishing the hallmark of the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Within this period, diverse political regimes and administrations have experienced crises of legitimacy whilst economies have simultaneously become more closely interwoven. The technological revolution that has transformed the possibilities for communicating among individuals, and within and across social groups, has in many ways accelerated the pace of change (Correa



and Parker 2004). Connections between these changes and sexuality have been explored in the context of the growth of consumerism and individualism accompanying globalisation as well as the new media images produced through cinema, television and especially the internet. One of the effects has been the production of enormously divergent modes of thinking about configurations of sexuality and gender (Altman 2004).

What are the implications of the multiple changes taking place in our societies for the ways in which sexuality may be ‘read’? And how might these ‘readings’ of sexuality be recounted and engaged with by different actors in different cultural and institutional arenas? The politics of sexuality have generally been problematised with regard to same sex sexuality, as opposed to the normative character of heterosexuality, that is, the sense in which heterosexuality is generally accepted as the way social and sexual relations ‘ought to be’. Whilst same sex sexuality is addressed in this project of outlining Pathways of Women’s Empowerment in the realm of sexuality, our focus is largely on the ways in which heterosexual women are themselves affected by normative heterosexuality (cf. Jackson 2006) and the importance of gender in sexuality.

We begin from the premise that sexuality is itself gendered, an understanding that is the outcome of considerable feminist analytical and political work in this sphere. At the same time, there is no singular theorisation of the relations between sexuality and gender. Yet the theoretical and political significance of such relations for domains such as the body, relations of intimacy, subjectivity and the workings of power and agency demands exploration of the terms (Richardson 2007). To this end, the concepts of heterosexuality, sexuality and gender are foregrounded in this concept paper and followed through in terms of their relations to norms which reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and male supremacy.



‘What are the implications of the multiple changes taking place in our societies for the ways in which sexuality may be ‘read’?’

The ways in which norms express the workings of power and privilege in the spheres of compulsory heterosexuality and male supremacy is explored in some detail (Jackson 2006; Miriam 2007; Feigenbaum 2007) on the basis that understanding the workings of norms is essential for their unravelling. The intricate and complicated connections between norms and agency (Mahmood 2005) are also examined, with a view to re-reading dominant feminist tendencies to treat agency primarily in terms of resistance to normative structures. With regard to women’s empowerment in the realm of sexuality, work in this sphere has prominently featured advocacy around sexual rights. Such advocacy has been marked by tensions of its own, particularly in relation to structures of normativity and heterosexuality. Some of the tensions in conceptualising entitlement in relation to sexuality include the relative balance between treating sexuality as a valid space for the search for pleasure, whilst seeking to prevent and punish sexual abuses in the private domain (Correa and Parker 2004).

The examples at the start of this paper feature just some of the diverse narratives and counter narratives of sexuality that we will be considering in the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment thematic group on Changing Narratives of Sexuality. We are interested in narratives as a way of approaching the study of sexuality for a number of reasons. Narratives allow us to explore cultural patterns of representations and action (Squire n.d) whilst opening up the theme of what social role stories can be said to play. Thus we may ask about the extent to which stories perform conservative functions by maintaining dominant orders. Alternatively, there is the question of how stories might be used to transform lives and cultures (Plummer 1995). The focus on changing narratives of sexuality is simultaneously a focus on the multiple changes shaping women’s relations to sexuality and power, and on the ways in which women



exercise their agency by taking up particular narratives of sexuality and using them to destabilise restrictive social and sexual norms. This concept paper addresses five main areas relating to the overall theme of Changing Narratives of Sexuality. The first (section two) is that of sexuality – how it is understood and its relations to gender and heterosexuality. This is followed by an examination of norms, power and privilege in the context of heteronormativity. Section four addresses the concepts of agency and empowerment before turning to the question of changing contexts in section five. The final section explores the uptake of narratives in social research and the dynamic of changing narratives of sexuality at the heart of this thematic focus.

2. Sexuality

How might ‘sexuality’ be understood from feminist perspectives? Below are three accounts of what the term sexuality might mean, emanating from diverse disciplinary and institutional locations. Only one of these accounts explicitly presents itself as defining sexuality. Whilst definitions would appear to be useful, it should be recognised that they are rarely obtained outside a framework of theorising. Stevi Jackson’s definition is located in her theorising the relationship of sexuality to the other concepts in her analysis, such as gender and heterosexuality. It is in the context of her exploration of the complexity of heteronormativity, that Jackson (2006: 106) offers the following definition of ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’:

While ‘sex’ denotes carnal acts, ‘sexuality’ is a broader term referring to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices,

relationships and identities. This definition assumes fluidity, since what is sexual (erotic) is not fixed but depends on what is socially defined as such and these definitions are contextually and historically variable. Hence sexuality has no clear boundaries – what is sexual to one person in one context may not be to someone else or somewhere else.

Pereira (2004: 1) highlights the ways in which sexuality is simultaneously diffuse as well as materially grounded in its diverse connections. Its choice as a theme for teaching in gender and women's studies enables many things:

The focus on sexuality is intended to connect intellectual and political agendas regarding *bodies* and the sexualised ways in which gendered bodies are treated in and beyond “sexual” arenas; *emotional, sensual and psychological experiences* of desire, pleasure, pain, intimacy, fulfilment and otherwise; the practices of sexual partners and how the “il/legitimacy” of *gendered partners, practices and relationships* gets defined, by whom, from micro- (e.g. psychic) to macro- (e.g. state) levels; and the meanings and *relations of giving and/or exchange*, monetary or otherwise, within which sexual encounters are embedded. Sexuality is thus articulated with the ways in which gendered human beings become defined within particular, singular *identities* and the *cultural* frameworks that give meaning to such constructions at given historical moments.

Mapping the connections among sexuality, human rights and development, Andrea Cornwall *et al.* (2008: 56) have this to say about sexuality:



... sexuality is about a lot more than having sex. It is about the social rules, economic structures, political battles and religious ideologies that surround physical expressions of intimacy and the relationships within which such intimacy takes place. It has as much to do with being able to move freely outside the home and walk the streets without fear of sexual harassment or abuse as it has to do with whom people have sex with. It is as much concerned with how the body is clothed, from women feeling forced to cover their bodies to avoid unwanted sexual attention to the use of particular colours to mark the gender of infants and begin the process of socialization of boys and girls as different, as what people do when their clothes are off. And, where society and the state collude in policing gender and sex orders, it can be about the very right to exist, let alone to enjoy sexual relations.

The above conceptualisations of sexuality come from differing perspectives and contexts. Jackson (2006) writes from a perspective rooted in the global North. Her focus is on theorising the boundaries of institutionalised heterosexuality and its overlap with heteronormativity, issues that will be explored further later in this paper. Her definition of sexuality ties it to the erotic, highlighting desires, practices, relationships and identities as well as the historical and contextual variability of social definitions of the erotic. Pereira's (2004) focus is on the multifaceted character of sexuality and the agendas associated with its political foregrounding in Africa. Like Jackson, she too refers to desires, practices, relationships and identities, locating these among key dimensions of sexuality which are gendered, such as bodies, experiences, 'legitimacy', giving/exchange, identities and frameworks for making meaning. She does not however specify the meaning of the 'sexual'. Cornwall *et al.* (2008) are interested in the ways

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sexuality is both visible and invisible in development agendas and practice internationally. Taking the body as their starting point, the authors view sexuality in terms of physical expressions of intimacy and the contexts in which these take place.

The conceptualisation of sexuality outlined by Cornwall *et al.* overlaps several key aspects of institutionalised heterosexuality: social rules, economic structures, political battles, religious ideologies, dress codes, gender socialisation and the policing of gender and sex orders. From these brief expositions of what sexuality might mean, I turn now to key perspectives on the framing of sexuality. One of the most pervasive approaches to understanding sexuality is predicated on a conception of sex as biologically driven and rooted in the ‘natural’ differences between men and women. According to this perspective, men have a stronger ‘sex drive’ than women and cannot be expected to be satisfied with a single female partner. Women, on the other hand, are sexually passive and content to remain faithful to a single male partner by ‘nature’, just as they are biologically equipped to bear children. This discourse draws upon a Freudian conception of sexuality as ultimately biological, embedded as it is within a model of instincts, their restraints and a ‘natural’ libido subjected to repression (Freud 1991). The gendered character of sexuality is thus erased from view through the appeal to biology.

In contrast, Foucault’s (1990/1979) conception of sexuality, not as an innate or ‘natural’ aspect of the body but rather the effect of historically specific power relations, provides a useful analytical framework for explaining how women’s experience is diminished and controlled within certain culturally shaped notions of female sexuality. Moreover, Foucault’s idea that the body is produced through power and is thus a cultural, rather than a ‘natural’ entity, supports a critique of essentialism. Unlike Freud’s



emphasis on repression, Foucault's contention was that the modern European history of sexuality is not so much one of repression as one of the power of description and production. His work unravels historically specific discursive relations in which power is always implicated, thus providing a starting point for thinking about available discourses of sexuality and their dynamic, changing inter-relatedness.

Ann Stoler (1995) refers to some of the ways in which Foucault's work has been received. These include the criticisms on the part of historians dismissing his empirical work as highly flawed, and the engagement on the part of social analysts with his theoretical insights, who treat his historical claims as less significant. She questions the neat partitioning of history from theory implied in these practices, pursuing a critique of her own regarding Foucault's chronologies. Stoler points out key absences in Foucault's work, such as the history of empire and the construction of 'race'. Her argument is that the production and distribution of desires in the nineteenth century European discourse on sexuality was filtered through an earlier set of discourses and practices that were prominent in imperial technologies of rule. The discursive and practical field in which European bourgeois sexuality emerged in the nineteenth century was rooted in a landscape shaped by the politics and language of conquest and 'race' in ways that were unexamined.

Where 'race' has been rendered invisible in imperial and colonial contexts with regard to mainstream discourses of sexuality, in other contexts it is religion, particularly Islam, that has been read in restricted and distorted ways. Ayesha Imam (2000) discusses the various essentialisms and confections plaguing the study of Muslim people and their societies, as the backdrop to diverse Muslim discourses relevant to sexuality. These include divorce, seclusion and access to education. Her analysis highlights



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the variations among Muslim discourses of sexuality, not only across communities but also over time.

Haideh Moghissi (1999) points to the conception of women in Muslim societies as weak in moral judgement and deficient in cognitive capacity, yet sexually forceful and irresistibly seductive. Women's susceptibility to corruption, in this view, underlies the obsession with sexual purity in the Middle East and hence the surveillance of women by family, community and state. At the same time, the relative variations in religious and political traditions, from Indonesia and Malaysia to Morocco, indicate that Islamic traditions and values may accommodate local cultural practices and processes of social and economic development. Nawal el Sadaawi (1980) refers to the use of religion as an instrument by political and economic forces, and those who rule to keep down those who are ruled. She points out how, in any society, it is not possible to separate religion from politics, and politics from sex.

Normative heterosexuality

The politics of sex and sexuality have sometimes but not always been addressed under the rubric of institutionalised heterosexuality. Most analysts have 'focused exclusively on its role in regulating homosexuality', leaving the character of normative heterosexuality itself relatively unquestioned (cf. Jackson 2006). More recently, there has been greater interest in the ways in which heterosexuals are themselves affected by normative heterosexuality. Feminists working in this field have drawn on the work of earlier writers such as Adrienne Rich (1980), who linked heterosexuality to the entrenchment of gendered divisions of labour and male appropriation of women's productive and reproductive capacities.

Jackson (*op. cit.*) argues that Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' could be read as a precursor to



‘heteronormativity’ but that there is an important difference. The notion of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ encompasses the sense in which ‘institutionalised, normative heterosexuality regulates those kept within its boundaries as well as marginalising and sanctioning those outside them’ (Jackson 2006: 105). ‘Heteronormativity’ as a concept, she points out, has not always included this dual character of social regulation. It is the focus on what goes on *within* heterosexual relations that Jackson (ibid: 105) considers of particular interest, given its role in how ‘heterosexuality depends upon and guarantees gender division’.

Heterosexuality is quite diverse, with different configurations being associated with varying degrees of respectability and status. Jackson (2006: 107) elaborates further:

Heterosexuality ... should not be thought of as simply a form of sexual expression. It is not only a key site of intersection between gender and sexuality, but also one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life. Heterosexuality is, by definition, a gender relationship, ordering not only sexual life but also domestic and extra-domestic divisions of labour and resources ... Thus heterosexuality, while depending on the exclusion or marginalisation of other sexualities for its legitimacy, is not precisely coterminous with heterosexual sexuality.

The value attached to the ‘normative’ character of heterosexuality is that accorded to a very specific form based on traditional gender arrangements and monogamy. Jackson (2006: 105) argues that ‘the analysis of heteronormativity needs to be rethought in terms of *what* is subject to regulation on both sides of the normatively prescribed boundaries of heterosexuality: both sexuality

and gender.’¹ In order to understand the complexity of heteronormative social relations, therefore, it is important to examine the relations among gender and sexuality in general, and heterosexuality in particular.

Sex, gender, sexuality

The distinction between “sex” and “gender” has been the focus of considerable attention among a number of post-structural feminists. One of the most complex analyses of this distinction comes from Judith Butler (1990, 1993). She argues that the relationship between gender and culture is not parallel to that between sex and nature but rather, that gender as a discursive element culminates in a belief in a prediscursive ‘natural’ sex. In other words, Butler puts forward the view that gender comes before sex, the latter being retrospectively produced through our understanding of gender.

Butler argues further that the sense in which gender is a stable category arises from the repeated enactment of heterosexual norms (which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section). The process draws attention to the workings of sexuality. Butler’s work has contributed to a shifting of emphasis from notions of gender and sexuality as fixed, coherent and stable towards understanding these categories as provisional, situated and plural. Whilst such work highlights existing conceptual inadequacies in theorising gender and sexuality, ‘this is much less apparent in terms of theorizing their (inter)relationship’ (Richardson 2007: 458).

The links between gender and sexuality are theoretically and politically significant for several domains of social analysis, such as the body; the project of self; the workings of intimacy; and how power and agency operate (Richardson 2007). In her examination of how the relationship between gender and sexuality has been



theorised, Diane Richardson argues that a number of specific approaches can be identified. These provide us with contested understandings of both the meaning of the categories and their relationship. The first is what Richardson calls the naturalist approach. The dominant western understanding from the mid-nineteenth to the second half of the twentieth century was that the relationship between gender and sexuality was an expression of an underlying natural, universal order. This was a natural order that relied on notions of sexual and gender dualism, with binaries such as male/female; heterosexual/homosexual; masculine/feminine. It is assumed here that sex, gender and sexuality are related to one another in a hierarchical and congruent manner. Embedded within this principle is a naturalisation of heterosexuality, such that when the link between sexuality and gender has been investigated it has been pursued through the study of non-normative genders and sexualities. This has been done in ways that reinforce sexual and gender ‘coherence’, rather than challenging the presumed link between the two.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a new corpus of sociological work emerged, which critiqued earlier essentialist ways of thinking. The shift away from biologically based accounts of the relationship between gender and sexuality to social constructionist accounts of each opened up analysis of the relationship between the two. This it did by contesting and pluralising the meanings associated with each term, suggesting that they were social rather than predetermined. What it did not do was signal a need that the two concepts should be treated as analytically distinct. The relationship between sexuality and gender was presumed to be interdependent. Richardson (*op. cit.*) points out that the two main epistemological approaches identifiable within this field of interdependence either tended to privilege gender over sexuality or the converse.



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Most feminist work exploring the influence of gender and sexuality on social relations and identity has assumed that gender and sexuality have to be examined together, with gender taking precedence over sexuality. The discussions have gone beyond the question of how the link between gender and sexuality is socially constructed to addressing the relationship between the two as one of the main means of constituting and perpetuating gender inequalities. In the process, the debates have broadened definitions of gender and sexuality.

Examples of such work are to be found in the writings of materialist feminists such as Delphy (1993), who views gender as the outcome of a hierarchy in which one class of people – men – have power over another class of people – women. Defined by a specific social and economic location, the gender categories 'woman' and 'man' are relative and contingent; they would not exist if social divisions did not exist. Richardson (2007) notes that within this conceptual framework, the binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality is derived from gender. More contemporary work includes that by Jackson (1999) who draws on this tradition, without trying to lay down general terms for the relations between gender and sexuality. She distinguishes analytically between gender and sexuality in order to theorise their interrelations more effectively. At the same time, Jackson argues for the priority of gender over sexuality on the basis of social intelligibility, emphasising that sexuality as currently constructed is inherently gendered.

An alternative approach to conceptualising the link between gender and sexuality is one that prioritises sexuality over gender. This is traditionally the case in Freudian psychoanalytical accounts, where sexual desire and sexual object choice are seen as central to the formation of gendered subjectivity through Oedipal processes. There are parallels here with naturalistic



accounts, both of which view homosexuality as a sign of ‘improper gender’ (Richardson 2007: 462).

From a very different theoretical tradition, MacKinnon (1989) also argued that sexuality is constitutive of gender. She theorised sexuality from a Marxist perspective on capitalism, developing a feminist theory of power in the process, in which she argued that the origin of women’s subordination lay in sexuality. Since this gave rise to a hierarchy between women and men, sexuality thus constituted gender. In talking about the relationship between gender and sexuality, MacKinnon shifts between references to sexuality and to heterosexuality. Richardson (2007: 463) highlights the significance of this point, stating that ‘it is important to recognise that the relationship between different sexualities and different genders may be different to the connections between gender and sexuality in general’.

A fourth strand of conceptualising the relations between gender and sexuality is one that views the two as analytically distinct but overlapping categories. The notion that gender and sexuality had to be examined together was relatively unchallenged until the 1990s. Writers such as Rubin (1984), however, called for a clear separation of gender and sexuality. Rubin argued that sexuality could not be theorised effectively through gender, since the two were independent arenas of social practice.

Richardson (2007: 464–5) gives a number of reasons why it is necessary to move beyond these frameworks in developing new theorisations of the relations between gender and sexuality.

We have reached a point where theories of the relationship between gender and sexuality, acknowledging the fluidity, instability and fragmentation of identities and a plurality of subject positions ... are seeking to address how gender’s link to sexuality is not determinate or unidirectional, but



complex, dynamic, contingent, fluid and unstable ... To do this we require theoretical frameworks that allow more complex analyses of the dynamic, historically and socially specific relationship between sexuality and gender, as well as the gendered and sexualised specificity of their interconnections. That will enable understanding of gender and sexual diversity and, related to this, avoid the past tendency to presume western frameworks, acknowledging non-western localized understandings of gender's relationship to sexuality that demonstrate the complexities and variability involved ...

Different modes of analysis are required to unravel the relations among gender, sexuality and heterosexuality, since they are constituted within and across a number of dimensions of the social (Jackson 2006: 108).

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The first of these dimensions is the structural, the patterned social relations that shape the social order at a macro level where gender figures as a hierarchical social division and heterosexuality is institutionalised through such mechanisms as the law and the state. Secondly, all social relations and practices are imbued with meaning, which encompasses the language and discourses constituting our broad cultural understandings of gender and sexuality and the more context bound meanings negotiated in everyday social interaction. Thirdly, there is the 'everyday', the routine social practices through which gender and sexuality are constantly constituted and reconstituted within localized contexts and relationships. Finally, in and of the social, there are social agents or subjects, sexual and gendered selves who through their embodied activities construct, enact and make sense of everyday gendered and sexual interaction.



Whilst Jackson refers to ‘embodied activities’ above, the absence of bodies from social analysis more generally, and from mainstream as well as more radical theoretical frameworks (socio-biology and social constructionist approaches, respectively) that aim to reintegrate body and gender, has been discussed by Robert Connell (1994). He argues that neither of these frameworks is adequate, opting instead for a theoretical position in which bodies are seen as sharing in social agency, by generating and shaping courses of social conduct. Connell’s earlier work (1987) points to the social relations of gender as a starting point for analysis. Such relations are central in structuring the ways in which the plurality of bodies are organised.

3. Norms, Power and Privilege

Institutional and cultural arenas not only configure representations of sexuality but may also be said to organise and express *norms* around women’s sexualities. In the context of these diverse arenas, we are interested in exploring norms relating to heteronormativity. As discussed earlier, the term ‘heteronormativity’ is often used to refer to the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life, thus ordering everyday existence (Jackson 2006). The relevant norms would be those implicated in reinforcing compulsory heterosexuality and male supremacy in the society. What are these norms and how might we understand the ways in which they are configured in relation to gender and sexuality?

Norms

Norms are generally viewed as being about meaning, values, beliefs or taken-for-granted assumptions that in



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some way guide human action. So we can think of the assumptions sustaining particular institutions and practices as normative. And since norms are generally thought of as being embedded in everyday activities, in ‘how things are normally done’, we may also refer to practices as being normative. Furthermore, subjectivity can be thought of as being affected by or effected through norms. Thus norms can be said to operate within a number of dimensions of the social. Jackson points out, however, that although heterosexuality as an institution is exclusionary, it governs the lives of those included within its boundaries in ways that cannot be explained by heteronormativity alone. Thus to say that heterosexuality or gender is normative does not provide a full analysis of the issue and may turn out to be too deterministic (Jackson 2006).

Contemporary usage of the term heteronormativity bears some of the deterministic undertones of the ‘norm’ that are evident from its history in social theory. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, ‘norms’ were central to sociological explanations of what held the social order together. The dominant ‘social systems’ approach of the time included norms as playing an integrative role which was largely based on consensus. Norms were assumed to be external to the individual and constraining, but because they were ‘internalised’ they were said to be constitutive of the self, as opposed to playing a merely regulating role. This perspective was challenged by Marxists, for whom the social order was based on conflicts of class interests; ‘ideology’ thus displaced notions of a normative order. However, ‘ideology’ was also seen as external, constraining and constitutive of individuals as subjects (Althusser 1971). An additional challenge to the ‘normative paradigm’ came from the alternative ‘interpretive paradigm’ (Wilson 1971), on the basis that the self, social conduct and even social reality were products of local, contextual interpretive



processes generated in and through interaction, rather than emanating from external norms (Jackson 2006).

The re-emergence of the term ‘normative’ in a new critical form can be traced to Foucault (1990). Even here, however, there are echoes of the externality of the old sociology, in the sense that the norm seems to have a status and effect that is independent of the actions governed by the norm. Moreover, norms are viewed as constituting the person as well as regulating their behaviour, with little room left for agency. On the other hand, the static view of norms having an integrative effect on the social order is here replaced by normalisation processes. This shows some convergence with the interpretive sociological tradition in which the normative status of heterosexuality is brought about and reproduced through everyday interaction (Jackson 2006).

In an early text, Gayle Rubin (1975) reviewed and critiqued Marxist, structuralist, Freudian and Lacanian literature, drawing on perspectives in political economy to postulate a universal ‘sex-gender system’. She located the more or less universal existence of gender asymmetry within a framework of compulsory heterosexuality. According to Rubin, prohibitions of same sex relations not only bar women from phallic power but they legitimise heterosexual alliance, or in her terms, the traffic in women. Ultimately, norms are about the workings of power, in this instance the power of male supremacy and of compulsory heterosexuality. As such, a deep understanding of their workings is essential if they are to be subverted.

Power

In a classic text, Kate Millett (1970) posed the question of whether the relations between the sexes can be viewed in a political light. Politics is understood here to refer to relationships structured by power, involving personal



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contact and interaction between members of specific groups (in this case men and women), such that one group of persons is controlled by another. Her response to this question was affirmative, in the light of the relations between the sexes being defined by a relationship of male dominance and female subordination. Rubin (1984) pointed out that social unease and the resulting emotional intensity was often displaced through disputes over sexual behaviour. In times of great social stress, she argued, sexuality needed to be treated with special respect. At the same time, sexuality had its own internal politics, inequities and modes of oppression. Rubin examined these through a consideration of sexual stratification and sexual conflicts as well as an analysis of ideological formations that limit the theorising of sexuality.

A Foucauldian perspective on power emphasises the sense in which power cannot be understood as something possessed and utilised by individuals or sovereign agents for the purposes of domination over others. Nor does power have a singular structure, location or intentionality that oversees its execution. Instead, power is more appropriately understood as a web of force that permeates life and that can be used in both enabling as well as coercive ways, producing in its wake new forms of relations, objects, desires and discourses (Foucault 1990, 1980).

Foucault also argues that power relations are the necessary conditions for producing the subject; namely, the set of abilities that define a subject's modes of agency are not the residual aspects of an undominated self that existed before the operations of power but are themselves produced through those very power relations. Central to this argument is what Foucault calls the paradox of subjectivation: the processes and conditions that undergird a subject's subordination are also the route to her becoming a self-conscious agent (Foucault 1980). As Saba Mahmood (2005: 17–18) points out, 'such an understanding of power



and subject formation encourages us to conceptualise agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable.²²

Building on Foucault's insights, Judith Butler poses the question of the constitution of subjects, since they are formed by power in ways that do not necessarily involve domination or oppression. For Butler, the subject is produced performatively through a reiterative enactment of heterosexual norms. Butler's conception of 'performativity' refers to a 'reiteration of norms which precede, constrain and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer's "will" or "choice"' (Butler 1993: 234). Performativity is to be distinguished from 'performance', which refers to a specific act. The reiterative enactment of heterosexual norms produce, on the one hand, the sense that gender is enduring and emanates from within the person, and on the other hand, the assumed fact of sexual difference which serves to consolidate further the heterosexual imperative.

In contrast to the general treatment of norms in feminist scholarship as an external social imposition that constrains the individual, Butler compels us to re-examine this opposition between the internal and external. Her argument is that social norms constitute the necessary terrain upon which the subject is realised and comes to enact her agency. At the same time, what makes the structure of norms stable – the reiterative character of bodily and speech performatives – is also what makes it susceptible to change and resignification, since reiterations may fail or be appropriated for purposes other than the consolidation of norms (Butler 2004).



Relating norms to fields of power

Mahmood (2005) pushes the question of norms further in a direction that highlights the problem of reading agency predominantly in terms of resistance to structures of normativity. She does this in two ways: by expanding Butler's insight that norms are not an external imposition on the subject but constitute part of her interiority, and by moving away from a dualistic approach to norms in terms of consolidation and subversion. This leads Mahmood to ask different questions about the variety of ways in which norms are inhabited, aspired to and realised, including questions such as what form a normative act takes; the model of subjectivity it presupposes; and the kinds of authority upon which such an act lies.

This approach to norms is to be contrasted with the normative assumptions about human nature that constitute the common ground of feminism and liberalism. Through her ethnographic account of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood (*op. cit.*) highlights and challenges the assumptions against which such a movement is held accountable. These include 'the belief that all human beings have an innate desire for freedom, that we all somehow seek to assert our autonomy when allowed to do so, that human agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them ...' (2005: 5).

In a similar vein, it is these normative assumptions about human nature as well as the normative structures of human rights that advocates for greater erotic justice utilised in the context of struggles for 'sexual rights'. Drawing on the institutional framework of human rights, sexual rights advocacy seeks to extend such entitlements by applying them to the field of sexuality. The potential for contradiction in this stance lies in the fierce critique and deconstruction of the normative structures within which heteronormativity is embedded, whilst simultaneously

'Drawing on the institutional framework of human rights, sexual rights advocacy seeks to extend such entitlements by applying them to the field of sexuality'



advocating an engagement with the normative structures of human rights – such as judicial systems, modern and traditional; governmental and intergovernmental agencies; and political discourse – in the pursuit of sexual rights (Correa and Parker 2004).

The human rights perspective values normative structures as tools for enhancing freedom and equality. It aims to fulfil the promises of the Enlightenment, to “complete the modern project”. ... Contemporary theories of sexuality, on the other hand, are strongly critical of normative discourses in their various manifestations: religious, juridical and scientific. They constantly remind us of the coercion, discrimination and control deployed by modernity itself ... (Correa and Parker 2004: 22–3)

What this highlights is contested terrain in which strategies for advancing justice in the sphere of sexuality are pursued by pitting opposing normative structures against one another. Normative structures in which heteronormativity is pervasive ultimately restrict the space for freedom and the right to exist for those who do not conform to the heterosexual norm. Sexual rights advocates who draw on human rights normative structures, on the other hand, seek to prohibit and prevent such restrictions and violations at the same time as expanding the space for expressions of sexual freedom. That the different structures relied upon in sexual rights advocacy are normative does not, in and of itself, preclude their strategic use; the content of norms and their relations to compulsory heterosexuality and male supremacy are ultimately of greater significance. The real challenge would appear to be not so much the normative character of the structures but the balance of power among them as well as the extent to which alternative normative structures can be freed of heteronormativity.



According to Jackson (2006), to appreciate the workings of heteronormativity, attention would have to be focused on the different dimensions of the social in which the effects and limits of heteronormativity may be perceived. If heteronormativity is based on the privileging of heterosexuality through its normalisation, then the route to understanding it would be through an examination of how both gender and sexuality are interwoven with the institutionalisation, meaning and practice of heterosexuality and the production of sexual and gendered subjects (*op. cit.*). 'Heteronormativity defines not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life' (Jackson 2006: 107).

Privilege

'Normative structures in which heteronormativity is pervasive ultimately restrict the space for freedom and the right to exist for those who do not conform to the heterosexual norm'

Miriam (2007) argues that the heterosexual norm cannot be fully understood without re-theorising the connection between heteronormativity and male supremacy. She draws on Adrienne Rich's notion of 'the law of male sex-right to women' to make the point that the heterosexual norm is theorised here in terms of a relation to power. It is these relations of power that underly the norm's co-existence with heterosexual bigotry, the denial of juridical rights to women and homophobia. Women's lived relations of heterosexuality, she goes on to argue, have to be understood against the background of a general acceptance of men's right to have sexual access to women. Miriam (2007: 211) uses the term 'heterosexualism' to refer to 'an ensemble of social, political and cultural forces that naturalize and uphold heterosexuality as an entitlement and privilege, while threatening the social and existential survival of anyone who deviates from the heterosexual norm'.

Miriam's notion of heterosexualism draws attention to the sense in which the workings of power bring in their wake expectations of entitlement and privilege that are



understood as ‘natural’. Privilege often operates at very basic levels, including as Cornwall *et al.* (2008: 6) pointed out earlier, ‘the very right to exist’. Erika Feigenbaum (2007: 5) speaks to the necessity of acknowledging the workings of heterosexist privilege, and the dangers of being blind to this, if heterosexual dominance is to be countered:

Heterosexism and homophobia reflect well-insulated positions of social dominance and embedded privilege. Privilege affords a choice, and a particular power and authority granted by systemic forces and, in the case of heterosexism, by numerical majority. ... In the case of projects that set out to resist heterosexism and homophobia, in failing to acknowledge even the possibility that [‘ordinary’] folks are *not* good or unbiased, their liberatory goals toward ending dominance will fall desperately short. Further, beginning with a reliance on something as hopeful as the general good nature of [‘ordinary’] folks serves to protect those who are already the beneficiaries of privilege, sanctioning their positions as judges. ... Such a position is unhelpful. People in positions of privilege are accustomed to protection, but when one aims to dismantle oppression, protecting the cloak of privilege is an unsuitable starting point.³

Feigenbaum (2007: 6) points out that ‘unmediated access to the privilege of claiming status as an individual’, beyond legacies of history, culture and social bonds, is only available to those in socially advantaged positions. Structural privilege plays out even in the absence of individual acts of domination; those who are socially advantaged do not need to actively oppress others for oppression to exist. In her discussion of the confusion between individual, personal traits and the workings of



structural power in encounters between feminists of colour and white feminists in the USA, Aida Hurtado (1999, cited in Feigenbaum 2007: 6) elegantly puts it this way:

It does not matter how good you are, as a person, if the political structures provide privilege to you individually, based on the group oppression of others; in fact, individuals belonging to dominant groups can be infinitely good because they never are required to be personally bad. That is the irony of structural privilege: the more you have, the less you have to fight for it.

Whilst the argument above was made in the context of a discussion about racialised privilege, a similar rationale may be applied to privilege on the basis of institutionalised heterosexuality. The dominance produced by such institutionalisation means that heterosexuals are privileged in ways that are very often not obvious to them. Sexual minorities, on the other hand, will be made acutely aware, in the smallest of actions, that they are denied ‘unmediated access to the privilege of claiming status as an individual’ (Feigenbaum *op. cit.*).

‘Structural privilege plays out even in the absence of individual acts of domination; those who are socially advantaged do not need to actively oppress others for oppression to exist’

4. Agency and Empowerment

Whilst the concept of ‘agency’ implies the capacity to act, the use of the concept has tended to be associated with action on the part of individuals. Feminist conceptions of ‘empowerment’ and ‘solidarity’, on the other hand, stress the collective characteristics of such action, carried out with a view to social transformation (e.g. Sen and Grown 1987). Whilst feminist usage of the term ‘agency’ has nevertheless been oriented towards the exercise of power, especially resistance to normative structures of power, an unravelling of the particular philosophical and political assumptions on which it rests and an alternative



deployment of the concept (Mahmood 2005) points to ways in which a critical understanding of agency can illuminate the workings of norms, as we saw in the previous section. The arena in which women's empowerment in the realm of sexuality has been pre-eminently championed has been in advocacy around sexual rights. Attempting to find the connections among sexuality, inequality and freedom is critical in this arena.

Agency

Hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forms of agency are mediated by institutions of power (McClintock, 1995). McClintock examines agency, not as a formal or philosophical issue but in terms of how institutions of power – such as the family, the law, the media, armies, nationalist movements and so on – mediate people's actions and desires. 'From the outset, people's experiences of desire and rage, memory and power, community and revolt are inflected and mediated by the institutions through which they find their meaning – and which they, in turn, transform' (1995: 15). Contradictions in the workings of such institutions offer potential possibilities for the exercise of agency and, possibly, change.

The workings of human agency within structures of subordination have been the focus of work in the humanities and social sciences since the 1970s. Drawing on this body of work, feminists have pursued the question of 'how women resist the dominant male order by subverting hegemonic meanings of cultural practices and redeploying them for their "own interests and agendas"', with the latter identified as the site for women's agency (Mahmood 2005: 6). The early work on women's agency was of critical importance in rethinking the portrayals of women beyond the West as passive and submissive beings bound by patriarchal structures.





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As referred to earlier, the notion of agency most often invoked by feminist scholars is rooted in liberalism and locates agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject (Mahmood 2005). Charting a different trajectory, Mahmood explores the women's mosque movement in Egypt which emerged around thirty years ago, as part of the Islamic Revival. Women started to organise weekly religious lessons, first in their homes and then in mosques, to read the Quran, the hadith and other religiously-inflected literature. The women's mosque movement was a popular movement that spread rapidly across most neighbourhoods in Cairo, offering lessons on the teaching and studying of Islamic scriptures, social practices and forms of bodily comportment considered necessary for the development of the ideal virtuous self.

In the context of feminism's privileging of those forms of agency that subvert and resignify hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality, other forms of agency are generally ignored. Mahmood's focus is simultaneously on 'the different meanings of agency as they emerge within the practices of the mosque movement' in Egypt and on 'the kinds of analytical – questions that are opened up when agency is analyzed in some of its other modalities – questions that remain submerged ... if agency is analyzed in terms of resistance to the subordinating function of power.' (2005: 153–4).

...if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a



progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms⁵ (Mahmood 2005: 14–15).

Earlier, I referred to Miriam's (2007) elaboration of heterosexual norms through a re-theorising of the connection between heteronormativity and male supremacy, which she does by revisiting Adrienne Rich's (1980) notion of compulsory heterosexuality. Miriam goes further to discuss her notion of agency within this framework. Whilst feminists have contested Rich's notion of male power on the grounds that it promotes a discourse of women as victims, Miriam's counter argument to this view is that whilst it is necessary to include an account of women's and girls' sexual agency in order to understand heteronormativity, this does not mean that a theory of 'sex-right' is therefore obsolete and inadequate. Instead, she argues, women's agency needs to be understood in terms of 'the sexual antinomies in late modernity' (Jackson and Scott 2004). Analysis of these, she points out, would help us demystify the hidden and entrenched character of the compulsory dimension of heterosexuality.

In making her argument, Miriam draws on Catherine MacKinnon's (1989) theory of sexuality, which developed Rich's notion of sex-right in significant ways. MacKinnon has been criticised for theoretical determinism on the grounds that she posits causal relations between sex, gender, domination and heterosexuality: 'Sex is gender is sexual positionality' (Butler 1994, cited in Miriam 2007: 214). Rather than providing a causal analysis, however, Miriam argues that MacKinnon poses questions such as what sexuality is understood to be; what sex means and



what is meant by sex. MacKinnon's conclusion was that sexual meaning, by which she understood heterosexual meaning, was constructed in the interests of male sexuality: 'It is these interests that construct what sexuality as such means, including the standard way it is allowed to be felt and expressed and experienced, in a way that determines women's biographies, including sexual ones' (MacKinnon 1989: 129).

The term 'determines' above, has been interpreted by many feminists to refer to causal relations between sexuality and gender, with gender being the causal condition for sexuality. Contesting this interpretation, Miriam (2007: 215) states that MacKinnon is referring here to the way in which gender is produced by sexuality:

'To say that women are agents is not synonymous with saying that they are empowered or free'

... we can see that the contents of normative feminine behaviour – what is allowed and disallowed – shows evidence of men's interests..., which is to say that the "gender definition of 'female'" coheres with "the social requirements for male sexual arousal and satisfaction"... Thus (hetero)sexuality itself is this process of putting into play the contents of gender, the process through which meanings of gender are embodied, and are thus constituted and organized in socially determinative/compulsory ways.

Rather than precluding agency, MacKinnon can be seen to be theorising the conditions under which women's sexual agency is "enabled". Agency is understood here in an ontological sense to mean the ways in which an embodied female subject lives through (hetero)sexuality: the latter thus becomes the ground of women's agency. However, to say that women are agents is not synonymous with saying that they are empowered or free. Freedom connotes the capacity to co-create and transform one's situation. MacKinnon's theory of (hetero)sexuality points to a



situation in which women's agency is only enabled within an interpretive and power schema based on men's sex-right. Agency therefore cannot be conflated, in and of itself, with 'transformative' agency. Instead, women's agency may be exercised in ways that 'reproduce or re-entrench, rather than overcome, domination, coercion or victimisation' (Miriam 2007: 213).

The question of women's sexual agency is particularly salient in the context of sexual violations. Miriam (2007: 222) points out that 'In order to understand women's sexual agency, we have to shift our attention from the liberal model of individual choice to the meaning of the situation in which women make choices'. Here she is recalling Frye's (1983: 56) point that 'The elements of coercion lie not in [the coerced individual's] person, mind or body but in the manipulation of the circumstances and manipulation of the options.' Relations of power precede any time-bound decision to consent to sex.

The tensions between sexual fear, occasioned by the realities of rape and numerous other forms of sexual abuse for many women, and the notion of sexual freedom as an ideal, have been addressed in a variety of ways. Focusing on African women, Patricia MacFadden (2003) puts forward the viewpoint that the notions of "pleasure" and "choice" are rarely recognised as being among the most contentious aspects of female sexuality. The fear of sexual pleasure is directly linked to the construction of women's sexuality as "filthy", arising as it does out of the recognition of an intimate relationship between sexuality and power. Moreover, the non-recognition of pleasure as fundamental to women's rights has led to debates and activism around sexuality, reproduction and rights being confined to "safe" zones within culturally sanctioned understandings of women's roles and bodies.

In a response to this piece, Charmaine Pereira (2003) points out that MacFadden erases significant complexities



and contradictions in African women's lives, making claims that rest on problematic assumptions. It was possible, in Pereira's view, to argue for the need to enhance the value of female sexuality and to promote basic sexual freedoms without assuming, as MacFadden did, the universal suppression of female sexualities. More importantly, it was necessary to understand how sexual pleasure and sexual power are lived and made sense of by diverse categories of women and men, just as there was a need to understand changing constructions of sexuality and the relations among sexuality and economic, political and social arenas.

Sexuality and women's empowerment

'In 'The social basis of the woman question', Kollontai (1977a) argued that the solution of "the family question" was no less important than the attainment of political equality and economic independence for women'

Some fascinating perspectives on how women's empowerment in relation to sexuality might be conceptualised are provided by early texts that address the political economy of sexuality. Writing in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, Alexandra Kollontai's ultimate aim was the complete liberation of working class women and the establishment of the foundation of a new sexual morality. In 'The social basis of the woman question', Kollontai (1977a) argued that the solution of "the family question" was no less important than the attainment of political equality and economic independence for women. Women's liberation ultimately encompassed freedom in love, an ideal that was unattainable without transformation of the social and economic conditions defining the obligations of working class women, fundamental change in all social relationships between people, and a thorough change of moral, psychological and sexual norms.

Kollontai developed these ideas further in 'Sexual relations and the class struggle' (1977b), pointing to the sexual crisis of the time and the hypocrisy of relegating sexual matters to the "private" realm, beyond the consideration of the social collective. Her point that a social



group works out its ideology, and thus its sexual morality, in the process of struggle with hostile social forces is as relevant today as it was in her time. Kollontai's autobiography (1971) is an illuminating example of the battle she experienced against the intervention of the male into a woman's ego, a struggle that revolved around a complex of decisions: work or marriage or love. Her novel *Red Love* (1927) is a psychological exploration of sexual relations in the post-war period, against a backdrop of changes in the contexts of women's engagement in public affairs and work outside the home.

Around the same time as Alexandra Kollontai was working and writing in Russia, the anarchist Emma Goldman was active in the USA. Goldman's two-part autobiography (1986) focuses on her passionate commitment to the political ideals of anarchism and her accompanying personal search for love and intimacy. Goldman's political aims concerned the quest for women's economic self-determination and for women's right to sexual freedom. Candace Falk's (1990) biography explores the intersection of Goldman's public and private lives, offering a critical analysis of anarchism and Goldman's relation to it through the trajectory of her personal experiences.

More recently, women's rights in the arena of sexuality have been vigorously pursued under the rubric of sexual rights, as mentioned earlier. At the transcontinental level, considerable work has been carried out on the relationship of sexuality to reproduction, health and rights (Correa and Parker 2004, Cornwall and Welbourn 2002). Correa and Parker (*op. cit.*) examine the controversies related to sexuality that have been expressed in United Nations negotiations and unravel the challenges inherent in different modes of conceptualising sexual rights. They argue that it is crucial to debate the unintended implications of choices in terms of the philosophies underlying human rights approaches.



A critical task, in addition, is the identification of human rights principles that would be appropriate for defining entitlements in relation to sexuality.

In conceptualizing sexual rights it is ... necessary to clarify the implications of such rights. Do they mean full legal protection with the risk of paternalism and intrusion? Or, on the contrary, do they fundamentally imply the right to privacy and intimacy, which in many circumstances increases the vulnerability of those less empowered in sexual matters? Or, instead of these two options, is the conceptualization of sexual rights to be viewed as a discursive platform for processing conflicts in relation to existing rights, in other words, as a political framework for creating the conditions for people themselves to be the subjects of their sexual rights? (Correa and Parker 2004: 25)

'Some of the challenges involved in framing a positive approach to sexual rights, that is, one that goes beyond protection from fear and abuse, require the re-thinking of the boundaries between public and private'

Some of the challenges involved in framing a positive approach to sexual rights, that is, one that goes beyond protection from fear and abuse, require the re-thinking of the boundaries between public and private. Correa and Parker (*op. cit.*) point out that the debate on sexual rights has 'matured enough to begin to openly advocate for sexuality as a practice of freedom' (2004: 26), that is, as a valid space for the search for pleasure, based on principles such as equality, responsibility and choice. This requires conceptual definitions and political strategies that will effectively 'prevent and punish sexual abuses that occur in the private domain and, at the same time, enhance the possibility of pleasurable sexual experiences in privacy and intimacy' (2004: 26). The authors point out that fostering a deeper sense of entitlement and responsibility in relation to sexuality will require cultural and social transformation to enhance change at the subjective, household, community and institutional levels.



Conceptualising the articulation among sexuality, inequality and freedom has provided a different kind of challenge. Prior to the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 1994, feminists had spent considerable time debating the relevance and meaning of reproductive rights in developing regions, and among marginal groups in wealthy societies. In these diverse locations, women's ability to make reproductive choices was restricted primarily by socio-economic constraints. In conceptual terms, the problem was resolved by defining that 'the full exercise of reproductive rights is dependent upon an enabling environment that includes democratic conditions, women's empowerment and material support, such as transportation, childcare, jobs and education'. Correa and Parker (*op. cit.*) argue that this framework should be used in the conceptual development of sexual rights too.

With regard to freedom, new inroads have been made to seeing freedom as a precondition for and an objective of social and economic justice (Correa and Parker 2004). Amartya Sen (1999) has gone beyond the mainstream understanding of freedom as political liberty in order to reconsider it as empowerment. For Sen, empowerment means greater individual and collective autonomy; this requires opportunities that contribute to development, broadly conceived, and which also serve to expand freedom in the public sphere. In addition, the Human Development Report 2000 (UNDP 2000) refers to different types of freedom in the context of sustainable livelihoods: freedom from want, freedom for the realisation of one's full potential, and freedom from fear with no threats to personal security. These broadened notions of freedom, as Correa and Parker (2004) point out, can be usefully explored in further refining sexual rights.

Placing sexual rights and sexual pleasure in context ultimately affords a more nuanced understanding of the

dynamics of sexuality in a given social setting. Musallam (1983) analyses, in some depth, the right to sexual pleasure among the four main schools of Muslim jurisprudence of the Sunni, and the tensions inherent in the dominant form of birth control, *coitus interruptus*. He discusses various arguments based on pleasure in sexual intercourse for free women, slave women and concubines, the latter two categories being in existence at the time the schools of jurisprudence were formed, and their varied rights to bear children. He also discusses Arabic erotica – popular literature comprised largely of anthologies of popular material on sex, which included specific birth control prescriptions. The place of birth control in Arabic erotica, as Musallam points out, is far more prominent than in either ancient Indian or Chinese erotica.

‘Amartya Sen (1999) has gone beyond the mainstream understanding of freedom as political liberty in order to reconsider it as empowerment’

Fatima Mernissi’s (2001) *Scheherezade Goes West* is an exquisitely crafted exposition of Western men’s fantasies of Muslim harems, juxtaposed against actual lived experiences of Muslim women in harems. Mernissi confronts the question of whether cultures manage emotions differently when it comes to structuring erotic responses. She illustrates how women’s erotic power in many Arab cultures relies on their brainpower, particularly their capacity to communicate and to work at the level of the mind. The aim is to arrive at an intense sharedness of the imagination that is expressed in dialogue. Mernissi points out that a man who wishes to seduce an intelligent woman, one who is concerned about the world, must necessarily master the erotic art, in this instance, the art of conversation. Her analysis highlights not only particular historical dimensions of cultural difference in erotic responses and sexual relations but also the character and gendered implications of women’s erotic power in the Arab cultures she discusses.



5. Changing Contexts

We have seen how our understandings of sexuality as well as of gender are likely to be deepened by recognising that they are the products of particular social and historical contexts (cf. Richardson 2007). An example that highlights this point is provided by Micaela di Leonardo and Roger Lancaster (1996), who trace the contours of Western historical political-economic work on gender and sexuality. The authors show that the taboo on homosexual relations in Europe was implicated in, among other things, the rise of capitalism, the fanning of religious and political intolerance, the emergence of the modern nation-state and the discourses and forms of colonialism. John d’Emilio (1997) refutes the myth that self-identified gay men and lesbians have always existed in all societies at all times. Instead, he argues that gay men and lesbians are a product of history and have come into being in a specific era. This is not the same as arguing that same sex relations do not exist in societies outside the West. d’Emilio shows how the historical development of capitalism, specifically its free labour system, has allowed large numbers of men and women aggregated in urban settlements, to call themselves ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and to organise politically on the basis of that identity.

A number of essays provide analyses of changing constructions of sexuality across time, grounded in historical materialism and politics. Anne Mager (1996) argues that in the decade following the Second World War, the increasing marital instability and violence against African women were the outcome of complex changes in South Africa. These were changes in which African men were desperately trying to reassert patriarchal domination. Men’s valuation of women was also shifting: from being previously valued for their fertility, women were now



‘How do we understand the more recent changes that have shaped the various contexts in which researchers will be analysing diverse narratives of sexuality?’

viewed as objects of sexual gratification. Jane Parpart (1986) examines women’s resistance to the use of urban African courts and new “customary” laws redefining sexuality in terms of patriarchal power. These processes occurred in the context of male rural elders’ loosening control of women’s productive and reproductive labour. Agnes Runganga and Peter Aggleton (1998) show how changes in the political economy of Zimbabwe over the last one hundred years or so, have changed dominant meanings of sexuality among indigenous people. New meanings have permeated among existing systems, profoundly changing elements of more traditional sexual culture.

How do we understand the more recent changes that have shaped the various contexts in which researchers will be analysing diverse narratives of sexuality? Correa and Parker (2004) highlight the extent to which the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries have been marked by rapidly accelerating processes of change that are unfolding on a global level. The crises of legitimacy marking diverse political systems and institutions have nevertheless been accompanied by the increasing interdependence of economies around the world. All this is taking place in the context of a technological revolution that has transformed communications among individuals, social groups and cultures. At the same time, the traditional structure of gender relations has increasingly become contested and ‘accepted notions of the relationship between family and sexuality have fragmented, broken down and been reinvented in societies around the world’ (2004: 19).

The growing movements of ideas, trade, money and peoples across the world – what has come to be referred to as globalisation – are associated with a variety of changes in social, economic and cultural spheres. Altman (2004) points out that globalisation has a bearing on sexuality in a number of interrelated ways. The common thread, he suggests, is the growth of consumerism and individualism,



characteristics that seem more easily transferable with economic growth than particular political values. New media images through cinema, television and particularly the internet, present hugely divergent ways of imagining sex and gender arrangements and identities. Whilst new styles in music, clothes and hair may travel relatively easily, however, the meanings they acquire in different contexts are likely to vary. The distance between these representations and those thought to be more grounded within the society mean that people increasingly 'live in a world rich in conflicting and hybrid imagery' (2004: 64).

At the same time, globalisation is leading to deepening forms of inequality on the economic front. The imposition of market economies and the withdrawal of state services have left many people increasingly pauperised (e.g. Pereira 2002). Radical differences in the opportunities that people have to benefit from rapid social change mean that whilst some have been able to move into middle-class life styles, many more have had to resort to petty crime, begging and sex work (Sassen 1998). One of the less obvious repercussions of this scenario then is that '... just as globalization is sharpening a sense of economic inequality in the world, so too it is ensuring that very different conceptions of the sexual will become politically contested.' (Altman 2004: 65).

The seemingly uncontrolled and uncertain change enveloping much of the world has gone hand in hand with increasing revivalism in religious, ethnic and national identities. Correa and Parker (2004) note that the serious threats presented to the security of social life by ethnic and theocratic struggles, as well as terrorist militias, have come under serious scrutiny in recent years. Many of the same factors, they point out, shape the increasingly complex relationship between social and economic change and radical changes in sexualities in cultures and countries around the world. The broader contours of such changes





are to be found in formal political arenas, such as the state-sanctioned persecution of homosexuals as well as in less visible processes of social and sexual change.

These processes range from the trans-local movement of sexual traditions and systems of meaning across previously impermeable cultural and political borders, to the emergence of feminist and lesbian and gay political movements outside their traditional base in the Anglo-European world, to the incorporation of conceptual frameworks related to gender, sexuality and health within development discourse and practice, and to complex struggles around sexuality at both local level (in disagreements about abortion, violence against the expression of sexual difference, and so on) and in debates at the level of the United Nations and international relations ... (Correa and Parker 2004: 1920)

‘New media images through cinema, television and particularly the internet, present hugely divergent ways of imagining sex and gender arrangements and identities’

6. Changing Narratives of Sexuality

The changes referred to above give rise to tensions and contradictions in the constructions of women’s bodies and sexualities. These constructions may form the basis for mainstream narratives of sexuality produced by institutions such as the media, the law, religion and the development industry; by cultural arenas such as popular music as well as for counter narratives produced by women. What form do these different narratives and counter narratives take? How might they be contextualised against the backdrop of the multiple changes taking place in a society at any given time?

Such questions have been addressed by Plummer (1995: 25) using an approach to the analysis of stories that acknowledges change, history and culture. Plummer poses



the question of what links exist between stories and the wider social world, namely, ‘... [what are] the contextual conditions for stories to be told and for stories to be received?’ Plummer’s question highlights two inter-related issues: what makes it possible for some stories to be told at a particular moment; and what interpretive communities exist in the social world which make it possible for stories to be heard at particular historical moments. Plummer (*op. cit.*) also raises the question of what social role stories can be said to play. ‘How might stories work to perform conservative functions maintaining dominant orders, and how might they be used to resist or transform lives and cultures?’

In the Changing Narratives of Sexuality theme group, we are interested in narratives as a way of approaching the study of sexuality. Why is it useful for us to think in terms of ‘narratives of sexuality’? What are narratives and how have they been invoked in relation to sexuality? I will begin with a few words about how ‘narratives’ might be conceptualised. As Squire (n.d.: 4) points out, ‘narrative itself is a slippery notion, hard to pin down’. At the same time, however, it offers broad access to a range of disciplinary traditions and is salient for fields within and beyond academia. Moreover, a focus on narratives provides space for the convergence of varied concerns and interests:

... work on narrative seems to let us combine ‘modern’ interests in describing, interpreting and improving individual human experience, which underpinned much qualitative social science research in the early and mid-twentieth century, with ‘postmodern’ concerns about representation and agency that drove the later ‘turns’, such as the ‘turn to language’, and with a set of questions, broadly derived from psychoanalysis, about subjectivity, the unconscious and desire that accord at times with modern and at times with postmodern frames of thought (Squire *op. cit.*).



'Placing the spotlight on narratives makes it possible for the content of stories to be brought into focus as well as the context of story-telling'

Placing the spotlight on narratives makes it possible for the content of stories to be brought into focus as well as the context of story-telling. The latter includes the real and assumed audiences of narratives as it does the social, cultural and fantasy contexts of narratives. As Squire (*op. cit.*: 5) reminds us, 'the notion of "story" always entails "audience" as well as "storyteller".'

Some of the key characteristics of narratives have been highlighted by Gergen (n.d.). The first is that narratives have a point and that point is saturated with value. So narratives provide evaluative frameworks. Second, an intelligible story is one in which events are selected to make the point more or less probable, accessible, important or vivid. Narrative demands thus have ontological consequences. Third, events in the story are generally placed in an ordered arrangement, according to local convention. Fourth, characters in the story typically have continuous identities across time. Fifth, the ideal narrative is one that gives an explanation; this suggests or establishes causal linkages that form the basis of the 'plot'. Finally, the narrative is framed as a narrative: it uses conventions to signal the beginning and the end, and this generates a sense of direction and a feeling of purpose.

In many ways, Gergen's account captures key elements of mainstream understandings of 'narrative'. These have been contested in other approaches to the production of narratives and their analysis. For example, Sclater (n.d.) points out that inherent in Gergen's approach are tensions between a view of narrative as a static product – a thing or an object – and a more dynamic view of narrative. The dynamic strands in Gergen's account are evident in his references to the evaluative dimensions of narrative as well as the sense in which narratives are not only social and cultural but inter-personal – to narrate is to engage as an active, interpretive human agent. Sclater suggests that one way of transcending the static view of narrative in Gergen's



framework is to emphasise the act of narration. She argues that narration is a dynamic signifying practice that is the work of embodied human agents in cultural settings. Importantly, it is the historical, social and geographical contours of people's lives that shape the language and discourses that are employed to construct stories.

The question of "What is a story?" may be addressed in several different ways (Squire n.d.). Squire discusses ways in which stories have been studied as replayed events, expressions of identities, cultural traces or a trace of something that is not there. What a story says and does can be similarly varied. Stories can be taken as cognitive or aesthetic re-enactments, as efforts at personal understanding, as social inscription and as emotional defences. A story may be read as addressed to its present audience or to a much broader audience of past, present and future figures, whether real or imagined. The common conceptual ground of the approaches referred to, however, is limited. Squire makes the point that it is in the potential diversity of narrative readings that their political importance lies.

Relating stories to events, personal identities and cultural representations are theoretically different endeavours. Analysing clauses, searching out an intertextual hermeneutics and decoding cultural meanings are epistemologically distinct programmes. Narrative researchers tend to adopt eclectic perspectives that are fairly unconcerned about such theoretical and methodological contradictions. The perspectives are, however, loosely associated by a kind of pragmatic politics. ... Whether we link narrative analysis to the personal preoccupations of biography, to psychoanalytically informed tracings of emotions, to structural concerns with language or to cultural patterns of representation and action, it can be argued

that ‘narrative’ operates throughout as a kind of theorisation of unrecognised or undervalued texts, and hence as a kind of politics for [contemporary] times.⁵ (Squire n.d.: 19).

Narratives, as we have seen above, have the potential to bring together diverse representations that foreground the range of different dimensions of the social identified by Jackson (2006), as we saw in section two. These are institutional mechanisms such as the law; arenas for the making of meaning, such as language, discourse and everyday social interaction; the routine social practices through which gender and sexuality are constituted and reconstituted in given contexts and relationships; and the sexual and gendered selves who construct, enact and make sense of gendered and sexual interaction. It is precisely because multiple dimensions of the social constitute the terrain on which the complexity of heteronormative social relations needs to be explored, that the salience of narratives as sites for the social and cultural representation of sexuality may be understood.

Narrative analysis takes a number of different forms (see Squire n.d., Andrews *et al.*, n.d.). Whilst the content of stories may be of particular significance in some instances, in others it may be the context that is more important. Plummer (1995) provides us with a useful way of thinking about the analysis of stories. His focus is on sexual stories, but he points out that his general approach may be applied to any story-telling process.

...for me, a sociology of stories should be less concerned with analysing the formal structures of stories or narratives (as literary theory might), and more interested in inspecting the social role of stories: the ways they are produced, the ways they are read, the work they perform in the wider social order, how they

‘Whilst the content of stories may be of particular significance in some instances, in others it may be the context that is more important’



change, and their role in the political process. ... Although recent developments in literary theory and cultural studies will prove useful, and there is indeed a need for analysing the formal properties of stories, I will constantly return to the social work they perform in cultures. *It is time to go beyond the text*⁶(Plummer 1995: 19).

It is envisaged that the studies in the sexuality theme component of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment programme will examine the theme of '*changing narratives of sexuality*' in one of at least two ways. The first dimension of *changing narratives* of sexuality has to do with the multiple changes that are occurring in all our societies, and the implications of such changes for the ways in which sexuality may be 'read'. Have changing practices and representations of women's bodies and sexualities been associated with new narratives of sexuality, and if so, what space do these narratives provide for women's empowerment? Alternatively, are the narratives of sexuality emanating from particular cultural and institutional arenas divorced from changing social contexts?

The second dimension of *changing narratives* is about the different ways in which women are exercising their agency to change restrictive narratives of sexuality. What forms of agency are being exercised and how? What are the sexual politics within which these struggles are taking place? To what extent are women able to produce counter narratives that broaden the possibilities for women's empowerment? Our aim is to identify where women's transformative agency and uses of power for positive change can be found.

In thinking about the stories that are produced, some of the issues to consider include how people come to construct their particular stories and what might silence them (Plummer *op. cit.*). Why is this particular story told as



opposed to any other? How is power implicated in the ways in which women and sexuality are represented? Since stories are not told in isolation from hearings, the question of how a story is heard is also of key significance. How are diverse readings connected to the social world in which they are read? What do women make of the narratives on offer and what bearing do they have on women's relations to sexuality? Andrews (in Andrews *et al.*, n.d.: 11) argues that people perceive reality in terms of stories and that ultimately, the ways in which we construct, interpret and recount our experiences to others bears a strong relationship to the storylines that are already in circulation. At the same time, dominant narratives may be challenged by alternative versions – what she calls counter narratives of 'how those stories we know best might be retold'.

'Since stories are not told in isolation from hearings, the question of how a story is heard is also of key significance'

Whilst we may all be familiar with the notion of narratives as stories told by individuals, we may be less familiar with the idea that institutions tell stories too, or have narratives embedded within their ways of working. What would be of interest here are the narratives of sexuality that may be discerned from an analysis of their practice, or which are consciously told as part of the ways in which institutional and cultural formations present or represent themselves to the world. Whilst Plummer's focus is on personal stories, many of the issues he raises can usefully be applied to institutions too. For example, why are particular institutional narratives told and not others? In a context where there may be multiple narratives in circulation, which institutional narratives get 'heard' and which ones are silenced?

Given our focus on narratives of sexuality, it is possible to identify different ways in which sexuality may constitute the theme of a particular narrative. These can be highlighted by pointing to some of the questions that may be of interest to us. Sexuality may be the overt subject of the narrative, as for example in news stories of sex scandals. Or



sexuality may be the covert subject of a narrative, as in a story about the ways in which Sharia law on divorce is applied in relation to women. Sexuality may feature overtly as well as covertly in romance narratives in television soap operas. Alternatively, the norms of sexuality in the account at hand might be so conforming to dominant norms that they seem inevitable, such that there is no story to tell.

How are women and power configured in the narratives of sexuality that we are highlighting? Mahmood's (2005: 153–4) argument that the analytical notion of agency should be uncoupled from the politically prescriptive project of feminism is instructive for our approach to understanding power and empowerment in narratives of sexuality. On the basis that feminism combines both analytical and prescriptive agendas, Mahmood makes the point that analytical exploration should not be reduced to the exigencies of political judgement. The work of analysis, she points out, is different from that required by the demands of political action, both in temporal terms and in terms of social impact.

The same principle can be applied to our analysis of diverse understandings of empowerment in the narratives we choose to address. Without attempting to conclude definitively whether an action, practice, text or any other entity is empowering for women or not, we may still engage in analysis of different notions of empowerment. The open-endedness of such enquiry would mean that the kinds of analytical questions posed do not presuppose a conclusive relationship to the furthering of feminist political agendas. This entails asking a number of questions of our research material. For example, how is empowerment being understood and by whom? What kind/s of power are being utilised, in relation to what other kinds of power? What is the context for all this? Which categories of women are involved? What are the implications for the woman or women involved, as well as



for other women? What forms of gender and sexual politics are implicated? What are the short-term and the long-term implications? And what is left out?

Sexuality will always be more than stories or narratives can express. Moreover, the sexualities expressed in stories are often likely to be covers for processes that are much deeper and more complex. The relationship between sexualities and narratives is such that sexuality may at times be revealed by stories and at other times, concealed by them. The narratives that we identify may draw on discourses relating to sexuality in complex ways. In some instances, dominant discourses may be offered as templates for the construction of acceptable stories. Narratives may be organised around cultural scripts and discourses that participants invoke and use for their own ends (cf. Sclater in Andrews *et al.*, n.d.). This raises the question of how diverse discourses of sexuality are related to or drawn upon in the particular narrative in focus. More generally, what patterns may be identified in a given narrative of sexuality? In telling one particular story, what other stories are not being told?

Narratives of sexuality take different forms and are imbricated in relations of power in complicated ways: as they circulate in culture and are taken up by different actors, different stories have the potential to expand or restrict the space for women's empowerment in ways that may be unanticipated. Of particular interest to us is the question of how women's agency in the realm of sexuality is manifested in relation to the overall theme of women's empowerment. The accounts produced by this thematic group will hopefully afford a rich understanding of the potential for narratives of sexuality to express the multiple changes impinging upon women in relation to sexuality and power. More than this, it is hoped that the collection will explore ways in which certain narratives of sexuality are taken up by women and become vehicles for the expression of women's agency in breaking with constrictive social norms.



Notes

- 1 Emphasis in the original.
- 2 Emphasis in the original.
- 3 My insertions in square brackets.
- 4 Emphasis in the original.
- 5 My insertion in square brackets.
- 6 Emphasis in the original.



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